

## THE PHYSICALITY AND METAPHYSICALITY OF WATER IN RUSKIN'S «MODERN PAINTERS I»

In the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), Ruskin takes an interest in marine art and particularly the marine art of Turner. It is worth mentioning the content of a section of this volume, «Of Truth of Water», in which the writer offers his first extensive account of the aquatic theme, and one which he would bear in mind in later years. As one might expect of a section which simultaneously refers to Canaletto and Turner, it is a heterogeneous work in tone and style. There are many aspects one could consider; the text can be read in terms of science, in terms of myth, in spiritual terms or in terms of Turner. More specifically, Ruskin in his account would refer to both the physical and the metaphysical connotations of water, often read in relation to his favourite painter's works. Whilst Ruskin more openly discusses the science of water (as in his early writings) than its moral implications, I would argue that both domains are employed in *Modern Painters I* in the same way: they are compact subjects, connected entities that refer outwardly and inwardly to the multiple and associative symbols of the aquatic theme. Both the physical (the visible, concrete things which relate to the laws of nature, of water in this case) and the metaphysical (what lies beyond that, our understanding of both its existence and significance) are never used casually, but are always loaded with personal, intrinsic meanings. Science and spirituality remained constant areas of tension in Ruskin's philosophy and, as this study will show, they are always related and often applied to the art world, without which his work(s) could have not taken shape.

One of Ruskin's intentions in the first volume of *Modern Painters* was to focus on water. He divided «Of Truth of Water» into three important and connected chapters: the first entitled «Water, as painted by the Ancients», the second «Water, as painted by the Moderns» and the last called «Water, as painted by Turner». However, realising the limitations of his expertise as a man of science, Ruskin immediately feared the incomplete-

ness of his treatment of sea painting in *Modern Painters I*. A persistent obsession with the role of science itself is clear from the following entries, in which he firmly declared:

It is necessary in the outset to state briefly one or two of the optical conditions by which the appearance of the surface of water is affected; to describe them all would require a separate essay, even if I possessed the requisite knowledge, which I do not. (III.496)

The scientific portions divided prospectively, in the first volume, into four sections, were meant to define the essential forms of sky, earth, water and vegetation: but finding that I had not the mathematical knowledge required for the analysis of wave-action, the chapters on Sea-painting were never finished, the material for them being partly used in the *Harbours of England*, and the rest of the design remitted till I could learn more dynamics. But it was never abandoned, and the corrections already given in *Deucalion* of the errors of Agassiz and Tyndall on the glacier theory are based on studies of wave-motion which I hope still to complete the detail of in that work. (III.678)<sup>1</sup>

A few years later, in his Preface to *Modern Painters V* (1860), Ruskin humbly observes: «the section on the sea was wholly unsatisfactory to me: I knew little of ships, nothing of blue open water» to be able to properly analyse what he calls «Turner's pathetic interest in the sea» (VII.7). In Ruskin's view his own scientific *watery* expertise must endeavour to find an appropriate consciousness and although his study on wave actions would never come to an end, not even in *The Harbours of England*, it is there where he attempted to materialise this principle. In other words, for Ruskin, a scientific approach was absolutely necessary to discuss nature with fidelity. In stating his intentions, he sums up both the contempt for his lack of expertise and the importance he gave to water within the physical world, and although he would never complete this project, his aquatic obsessions continued to form an integral part of his study.

In this section of *Modern Painters* Ruskin made his first attempt to define water as «the most wonderful» «of all inorganic substances» (III.494). He concentrated on its weight, force, power and colour. His juvenile aquatic works were also evidently based on empirical evidences. From a young age, Ruskin knew that the critic of art was not only responding to a theoretical fascination with the outside world. He understood that in order to be faithful to nature he had «to take some note of many physical sciences; of optics, geometry, geology, botany and anatomy» (V.6). This

<sup>1</sup>) This second entry is taken from Ruskin's Preface to *In Montibus Sanctis* (1884). It was published by the editors of the Library Edition of *Works* as Appendix IV to the first volume of *Modern Painters*.

later statement appeared in *Modern Painters III* confirms how, for Ruskin, a satisfactory scrutiny of nature necessitated a scientific explanation. More specifically, it was to the phenomena of reflection, deflection, imperfection of the reflective surface, its changes in colour and the way in which our eye perceives the reflected rays, to which he turned his attention, as well as to the impossibility, on the part of a painter, to portray water faithfully. For example, before discussing «Water, as painted by the Ancients», he targeted the intrinsically contradictory nature of the water's "rules" as well as his own concerns:

The accidental modifications under which general laws come into play are innumerable, and often, in their extreme complexity, inexplicable, I suppose, even by men of the most extended optical knowledge. What I shall here state are a few only of the broadest laws verifiable by the reader's immediate observation, but of which, nevertheless, I have found artists frequently ignorant; owing to their habit of sketching from nature without thinking or reasoning, and especially of finishing at home. It is not often, I believe that an artist draws the reflections in water as he sees them; over large spaces, and in weather that is not very calm, it is nearly impossible to do so; when it is possible, sometimes in haste, and sometimes in idleness, and sometimes under the idea of improving nature, they are slurred or misrepresented. (III.496)

Ruskin is entirely correct here, both artistically and scientifically. The motions of water have a scientific basis so that it cannot be properly depicted without taking this aspect into consideration. Furthermore, water is illuminated not only by the main source of light (the sun, for example) but also by the reflected light, which is often very hard to represent, especially its reflective and often imperfect surface. Such scientific knowledge is important to Ruskin. His consciousness for science as well as for the nuances of the colours of water (he interrogates himself on the inherent hue of water which modifies dark reflections, and does not affect bright ones) seems to maintain a continuum in his literary production. For Ruskin, as well as Turner, colour was more important than the objects represented, for our understanding of these objects (as scientists have shown) depends on the different textures of light. In other words, it is by understanding colour (as distinct from light and shade) that one can better understand form, in this case the form (appearance) of water <sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, Ruskin's concern with the inability of some painters to portray water must be understood in the light of their lack in scientific knowledge. For Ruskin, if he is to represent water truthfully, the artist

<sup>2</sup>) A specific study of Ruskin's interest in optical phenomena is offered by John Gage in *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 192 ff.

must capture it by understanding the importance, for example, of reflected colours, as well as the different shapes and motions that exist in nature. However, he soon extended his views on water (and water painting) beyond the rigidly scientific. He is even more willing to accept the inner aspect of perception, and in doing so he deliberately emphasises that the essentially human domain, with all that implies, the psychological, the spiritual and the subjective, determines a good work of art. Generally, the Ancients and the Moderns seemed to obscure this reality. The only exception comes from Turner, whose waterscapes allowed Ruskin to state with confidence and power that they were “beyond comparison” when related to some of his contemporary nineteenth-century artists’ works, or, more categorically, to the art of the past.

In pictorial representations, for example, Ruskin looked at the old masters’ depictions as «beyond all expression and explanation bad» and «cold and valueless» (III.498). As for the Moderns, he felt that their paintings started to express the immaterial aspects of Nature, meaning that some of their works were heavily reliant on an insightfully vivid palette which transcended the mere factuality. Fielding’s pictures, for example, become, for Ruskin, «the finest examples of high intention and feeling to be found in Modern art» (III.534). The only other nineteenth-century artist besides Turner who could paint water, Ruskin believed, was Stanfield as his «works [...] proceed from the hand of a man who has both thorough knowledge of his subject, and thorough acquaintance with all the means and principles of art» (III.534). But what is more significant is that his art begins to suggest to Ruskin the real “truth”, «the much concentrated knowledge of sea and sky» (III.535). All in all, then, for the writer science must come together with humanity to form a proper work of art: there must be a mutual benefit to both disciplines.

Although there were those, like the Moderns, who claimed that water was more than a pure, thin and transparent liquid, it was to Turner’s works that Ruskin was looking as perfect combinations of both the physical and metaphysical characteristics of water. The painter’s accuracy in depicting its motions and light effects enthralled Ruskin. At first he had attempted to explain these phenomena only scientifically, but now he is trying to secure the objective truth of the artistic representation to its subjective, emotional counterpart. This is the case with *Land’s End* (1834-1835; Fig. 1), one of the many pictures about which Ruskin expresses enthusiasm in this part of *Modern Painters*<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>3</sup>) A preparatory study for «Longships Lighthouse» can be found in *Works III* facing page 566 (plate 10). Ruskin often refers to Turner’s pictures by using a shorter version of their original titles. At times he even forges his own appellations. See, for example, *Land’s End* for *Longships Lighthouse*, *Land’s End*; *Laugharne* for *Laugharne Castle*, *Caermarthen-*

And throughout the rendering of all this there is not one false curve given, not one which is not the perfect expression of visible motion; and the forms of the infinite sea are drawn throughout with that utmost mastery of art which, through the deepest study of every line, makes every line appear the wildest child of chance, while yet each is in itself a subject and a picture different from all else around. Of the colour of this magnificent sea I have before spoken; it is a solemn green grey (with its foam seen dimly through the darkness of twilight), modulated with the fullness, changefulness, and sadness of a deep wild melody. (III.567)

This general desire on the part of Ruskin to integrate the actual knowledge with the emotional, naturally culminated in his attempt to conjoin the material and immaterial aspects of art. As this quotation illustrates, he clearly believed that art could benefit from scientific information. For instance, he constantly stresses the need to represent water with “mastery”, meaning skilfully, that is, as it appears in nature. Its colours, motions and shapes must be represented only after a detailed study of the external world and Turner certainly succeeds in doing this.

But Ruskin's belief in the necessity of rules is complemented by a deeper analysis. Turner's sea is «infinite», «magnificent», its colour is «solemn» and there is «fullness», «changefulness» and a «sadness» in it; all the immaterial aspects of water, which would preoccupy Ruskin in later years. He believes that art concerned itself with emotional characteristics such as sentiments, faith and human beliefs. Ruskin was certain now that an artist should concern himself with both the physical and the metaphysical: the objective and the subjective. So that whilst a scientist might provide us with a useful insight into the cause and nature of water in turmoil, the experience of it can be best conveyed by an artistic, subjective interpretation. This is the case with Turner's paintings, where feelings such as terror, awe, pity as well as love and admiration are the power. And Ruskin could discuss exactly the water and sea that Turner was painting; its «wild, unwearied, reckless incoherency» (III.564); as well as the «white, wild, cold, comfortless waves» (III.567), the «power, velocity, vastness, and madness» of the surges (III.570). These are the empirical facts that science should not attempt to explain rationally, and it is Ruskin's prerogative to bring fresh to the reader (and the viewer) new insights into the complexity of these principles. As we shall see later on, the metaphysical dimension of water (as separated from its physical counterpart) will allow Ruskin to state its significance with a new confidence and power, and to deduce further insights from it.

*shire; Pas de Calais for Now for the Painter: Rope Passengers going on Board.* I am using here Ruskin's denominations.



*Fig. 1. - J.M.W. Turner, Longships Lighthouse, Land's End, watercolour, 1834-35 ca., 29 × 44 cm (Private Coll., UK).*

*Fig. 2. - J.M.W. Turner, Laugharne Castle, Caermarthenshire, watercolour, 1831-32 ca., 30 × 46 cm (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, USA: Bequest of Frederick W. Schumacher).*



*Fig. 3. - J.M.W. Turner, Sun of Venice going to Sea, oil on canvas, 1843 ca., 61.5 × 92 cm (The Turner Coll., Tate Britain, London).*



Fig. 4. - J.M.W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming on*, oil on canvas, 1840, 91 × 122.6 cm (*The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Henry Lillie Pierce Fund*).



Fig. 5. - J.M.W. Turner, *West Cowes, Isle of Wight*, oil on canvas, 1827 ca., 29 × 42 cm (*Private Coll., UK*).

The question of how water should be painted leads the writer to an examination of the ways in which it is often depicted according to conventions and he expressly manifests his disgust for this unnatural, unoriginal and un-spontaneous approach to art:

there is no perfect or even tolerably perfect sea-painting to refer to. The sea never has been, and I fancy never will be nor can be painted; it is only suggested by means of more or less spiritual and intelligent conventionalism. (III.499) <sup>4</sup>

As we have seen, Ruskin's first chapter on the Ancients shows how the old masters were responsible for portraying cold and valueless seas; and how the Moderns, although less evidently, faced similar difficulties. That Ruskin was *au courant* with the problems the painters had to face when depicting water (especially its shadows, reflections, motions and weight), has been noted. Thus, it seems as if conventionalism for an artist figures as the only possible solution to "suggest" the sea, rather than to paint it as it seems impossible to catch and properly draw its motions, its changefulness and unpredictability onto canvas. Yet, Ruskin tries to explain this artificial treatment of the natural landscape and, what impressed him most, was that Turner was also painting according to conventions. Although he recognises the majesty and force of the artist's water-pictures he thought of them «after all by conventionalism still» (III.499) and at times he uses the painter's depictions of the texture of the sea's surface like its foam or its shore-breakers to say how he «has tried hard [...] but it will not do» (III.562). Thus, water and its artistic representation become a very complicated thing for both an artist and a critic to look into. Ruskin, who in art was certainly looking for a subjectively defined truth, still had the conventional problem to resolve and he thought it was time to speak.

There was a way, he believed, in which these weaknesses or defects could be avoided:

constant and eager watchfulness, and a portfolio filled with actual statement of water effect, drawn on the spot and on the instant, are worth more to the painter than the most extended optical knowledge. Without these all his knowledge will end in a pedantic falsehood; with these it does not matter how gross or how daring here and there may be his violations of this or that law; his very transgressions will be admirable. (III.508-509)

It would be impossible to imagine that such advice could have been given by someone who initially thought science as a fundamental part in an artist's work. But Ruskin strongly confirms: «it is not feeling, nor fancy, nor imagination, so called, that I have put before science, but watchfulness,

<sup>4</sup>) In *The Elements of Drawing* Ruskin will insist on the idea that the sea may only be suggested through conventions. See *Works*, XV.49, 216-217.



experience, affection, and trust in nature» (III.509). He had not only altered how one was to view water, but also the methodology by which one was to represent it. Without «watchfulness» the artist could now be accused of being factually incorrect. Fundamentally, then, a scientific attention to detail could not provide all of the answers to mankind's questions. At the beginning, it might seem that Ruskin was endorsing the view that science was the only means to deal with perennial truths but at the same time he perceives the impossibility of a totally "faithful" empirical approach to nature. This is why he turns back to the value of a «constant and eager» attention to water phenomena; «watchfulness» becomes a key word in Ruskin's vocabulary because not only did it mean the ability to see water, it also meant the propensity to understand the value of what was seen.

Together with «conventionalism» and «watchfulness», Ruskin considers the freedom of an artist to change the facts of the real world ("licenses") as something positive while creating a work of art; and generally speaking he expresses his contempt for the evident "mistakes" which, on the other hand, drive totally away from reality. Ruskin openly admits that «there is a difference between the license taken by one man and another, which makes one [...] admirable, and the other punishable» (III.509) and in his investigation of Turner's painting *Pas de Calais* he constructs a positive reading of the artist's inaccuracy in portraying the buoy by justifying it:

I am almost certain that it would have been done wilfully in this case, even had the mistake been recognized, for the vertical line is necessary to the picture, and the eye is so little accustomed to catch the real bearing of the reflections on the slopes of waves that it does not feel the fault. (III.510)

From this specific quotation one gathers that licenses and mistakes (as opposed to a factual approach to nature) are accepted by Ruskin only when the eye does not perceive them as real mistakes but as part of the whole. Also, this produces perhaps a more satisfying imaginative and visual effect on the viewer. What is particularly significant is that Ruskin, little by little, is detaching himself from his early thoughts on artistic standards of factual accuracy. He perceives the natural world as an illimitable, multifaceted, changing entity, which needs to be depicted in its wholeness. The difficult question concerning an artist's freedom seems to acquire positive connotations, as Ruskin was, most of the time, intending the transgression of rules as a form of innovation, which needed to be looked at with a critical but welcoming eye. In *Modern Painters I* he writes that «an artist may know all these laws, and comply with them, and yet paint water execrably; or he may ignore all the laws and paint water gloriously» (III.508). This illustrates very well how he was able to combine the science of water with the *art of water*.

Attention now turns to Ruskin's fascination with Turner's different ways of painting the best of subjects. First of all he believes that calm aquatic

scenes are easy to represent, whereas a sea characterised by «thousand of exquisite effects» (III.508), for the complexity of its surface, will never be properly painted. Calmness and roughness are by Ruskin identified with order and chaos, a point which he emphasises in his study on the contrary waves produced by rebound from shore. First of all, he alludes to this fact with an antithetical language: «disturbance», «disorder of the waves», «the most violent storms», «rage» and «local agitation» are in opposition to «calm», «still» and «quiet water» (III.548). At first, Ruskin's language simply recalls two characteristics of water but one needs to draw attention to the fact that, for him, it was self-evidently true that an artist who penetrates the relevance of both fields fuses them into one unified vision. In Ruskin's opinion, Turner was best able to achieve this. All this goes to give a brief account of the painter's artistic versatility (especially his fascination with both calm and rough water) and of his remarkable expertise.

We may first concentrate on Turner's representations of water in turmoil. One of the pictures which Ruskin here discusses in relation to chaos, is *Laugharne* (1831-1832; *Fig. 2*), an art work that for him represents the

fitfulness and fury in the tossing of the individual lines, which give to the whole sea a wild, unwearied, reckless incoherency like that of all enraged multitude, whose masses act together in phrensy, while not one individual feels another. (III.564)

Whilst Ruskin addresses the picture to discuss the difficulties encountered by a painter in drawing foam and surges, his analysis goes even further when conceiving Turner's work as an example of the damaging effect of strong light, which he will later define in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* on the exhibition of the Turner drawings (1876), as the «mere wreck of what it was» (XIII.343). Moreover, in *Notes by Ruskin on his Drawings by Turner* (1878), Ruskin comments on the painter's compositional use of the repetition of forms in the picture, and points out that its «chief wonder [...] is in the exquisite stone and ivy drawing of the grey ruin» (XIII.441-442). With age, Ruskin tried more and more to provide greater context to each observation; he felt that to value water in all its forms and contexts was a hint to understand at the outset both its beauty, power and majesty and the role that all these features play in nature. To do so would be to underlie the multifarious character of the universe of water.

In order to comprehend fully Ruskin's views on chaos we need to complement our discussion by turning to Turner's *Land's End*, a work which, as we have seen, fully illustrates the painter's understanding of natural forces. Ruskin thought of the watercolour as an

entire disorder of the surges when every one of them, divided and entangled among promontories as it rolls in, [...] throwing all behind into disorder, breaking up all the succeeding waves into vertical ridges, which in their

turn, yet more totally shattered upon the shore, retire in more hopeless confusion; until the whole surface of the sea becomes one dizzy whirl of rushing, writhing, tortured, undirected rage, bounding and crashing, and coiling in an anarchy of enormous power; subdivided into myriads of waves, of which every one is not, be it remembered, a separate surge, but part and portion of a vast one, actuated by internal power, and giving in every direction the mighty undulation of impetuous line which glides over the rocks and writhes in the wind, overwhelming the one, and piercing the other with the form, fury, and swiftness of a sheet of lambent fire. (III.566-567)

Turner's sea is for Ruskin an intense and totalizing experience. His words, his phenomenological attention to any single aspect of nature, his gathering detail upon detail of the gale, underscore the universality of Turner's vision. Ruskin's language asks us to participate in the energy, strength, power, atmospheric tumult of the artist's experience. Water, here in its roughness and might, is also a destructive element so that it is even harder for the viewer to see himself at the centre of the scene. In other words, then, what appeals to Ruskin about Turner's rough seas is the sense of the impulsive energy that the painter confers on his subjects and which his disciple likes to express with forceful metaphors of speech.

Ruskin's discussion of Turner's calm water in *Modern Painters I* certainly represents a change in tone and style when compared to his analyses of restless marines. Generally, he held in high esteem Turner's peaceful seascapes. First of all, he exhorts that «repose has been aimed at in the same way, and most thoroughly given» (III.548). It is important to understand at this stage his writing on water as a contribution between the opposites: «the repose of the wide river» and «the tranquillity of a majestic current» (III.548) against the wild and furious aquatic representations commented above. According to Ruskin's comprehension of Turner's works, what is significant is where the opposites meet: in the security of a port, for example, which offers protection from the intemperance of the open sea. To sum up, this section of *Modern Painters* also presents the author's attention to the dichotomy between the sea and the land, which provides a continuum for the writer's thinking about water, but it also anticipates, for instance, the main theme of *The Harbours of England*, his later writing of 1856. The parable of Ruskin's language is here very clear: his early writings work as a succession of experiments conducted in order to arrive at meditated conclusions. He did evolve as a thinker. This concerns not only questions about the relationship between the sea and the land but also about order and chaos. What emerges at this early stage already is the range and sophistication of Ruskin's thoughts about water.

The complexity of Ruskin's eye is made even more vivid through the analysis that he offers in *Modern Painters I* of how to paint the sea, when from the land, when far from it. He had identified Turner's depictions of

the sea as sometimes «uniform», «monotonous» and «uncomprehended» (III.562) when seen from the firm land. This same feeling inspired the painter's decision to place the spectator «not on the shore, but twenty or thirty yards from it, beyond the first range of the breakers» in order to experience «the grand characters of the sea» (III.564). References to the angle from which a picture must be looked at are also expressed in Ruskin's analysis of Turner's *Port Ruysdael* where

the shadow of the pier-head on the near waves is marked solely by touches indicative of reflected light, and so mysteriously that when the picture is seen near, it is quite untraceable, and comes into existence as the spectator retires. (III.569)

Ruskin's views on the sea and the land are made more vivid through the implication of the human presences in Turner's pictures. Ruskin discusses what Turner paints, bringing the reader closer to the subject. The canvas *Sun of Venice going to Sea* (Fig. 3), depicts an early morning sunlight in Venice. One aspect of this work particularly intrigues Ruskin: the depiction of the boats in the lagoon, which his prose attempts to explain.

Nothing could be more faithful than the boat, which was the principal object in this picture, in the cut of the sail, the filling of it, the exact height of the boom above the deck, the quartering of it with colour; finally and especially, the hanging of the fish-baskets about the bows. (III.545)

In the allusion to the boat and (indirectly) to the mariners' occupations suggested by the fish baskets, Ruskin invites his readers to recall the significance of commercial activities. Furthermore, the acuteness of his mind is confirmed by the comparison he makes between Canaletto's Venice and the sea trade of the city in the nineteenth century:

Venice is sad and silent now, to what she was in his [Canaletto's] time; the canals are choked gradually one by one, and the foul water laps more and more sluggishly against the rent foundations: but even yet, could I but place the reader at early morning on the quay below the Rialto, when the market boats, full laden, float into groups of golden colour, and let him watch the dashing of the water about their glittering steely heads, and under the shadows of the vine leaves, [...] and the glowing of the scarlet gourds carried away in long streams upon the waves, [...] the crimson fish baskets. (III.515)

The idea of the lagoon city as a safe abode, which appeals to both artists' imagination is highly meaningful here. Ruskin's words show the extent to which water was, like faith and poetry, an aspect of a great whole which could provide the universal truth. His commercial consciousness is already clear in his references to steamboats when he analyses the «Seine and the Loire» series in the first volume of his *magnum opus*. This can be easily illustrated by quoting two short passages:

Again, in the Confluence of the Seine and Marne, we have the repose of the wide river stirred by the paddles of the steam-boat, whose plashing we can almost hear; for we are especially compelled to look at them by their being made the central note of the composition – the blackest object in it, opposed to the strongest light. (III.548)

In the Jumièges and Vernon we have further instances of local agitation, caused, in one case, by a steamer, in the other, by the large water-wheels under the bridge; not, observe, a mere splashing about the wheel itself, this is too far off to be noticeable, so that we should not have ever known that the objects beneath the bridge were water-wheels, but for the agitation recorded a quarter of a mile down the river, where its current crosses the sunlight. (III.549)

These are significant lines. In *Modern Painters I* Ruskin aimed to find a prose which could do full justice to his subject. It is a book which confirms the importance of traditional knowledge, but challenges the world to be contemporary, to be technological, by referring to new devices. It reminds us of *Modern Painters'* “modernism”; it is a book which reflects nineteenth-century ideology: for although the past is not forgotten, the desire for a new order is in the air, with all the contradictions that progress represents. Clearly, Ruskin's discussion of steamboats could be recognised as an attempt at situating “modernity”, an attempt which increases through the pages of his text. The «rising vapour» (III.553) which he discusses in his analysis of Turner's *Upper Fall of the Tees* and the «smoke» of some painted representations suggest the enormous interest he attributes to the «ponderous power of the air» (III. 554).

These views about artistic vapours start to worry Ruskin. With time, he would refer to their effects as the greatest plagues of his time. To resolve these universal concerns was Ruskin's task. But there was another, deeper dimension to what water meant to him (and to Turner). The peculiar power of Turner's waterscapes is read by his disciple as the reflection of a subjectively defined, unempirical Truth.

As we have seen, «Of Truth of Water» is certainly on one level a fair and competent attempt at discussing the physical properties of water. Yet, the writer perceived the debate over water as integral not only to a scientific belief; as the title itself suggests, Ruskin's writing assumes a theological and moral significance, as the combination of the words «Truth» and «Water» witness the Truth of God's presence in the aquatic element, the same divine presence that Ruskin detects in Turner's landscapes. In this way the image of the sea acquires a mystical meaning, sometimes strictly related to the idea of God.

A characteristic of this part of *Modern Painters I* is the ambiguity of the language. To begin with, as the notion of «Truth» implies, Ruskin's writing lets one think of water as redemptive: it becomes a medium for the transmission of spiritual Truth as well as natural beauty. The first chapter

of Genesis is the Biblical justification for much of this section. Water, as created by God, becomes a religious and metaphysical entity:

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters [...] / And God said, Let there be a / firmament in the midst of the waters, / and let it divide the waters from the / waters. / And God made the firmament, and / divided the waters which were under / the firmament from the waters which / where above the firmament: and it / was so. [...] And God said, Let the waters / under the heaven be gathered together / unto one place, and let the dry land / appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas: and God saw that it was good. [...] And God said, Let the waters / bring forth abundantly the moving / creature that hath life, and let fowl fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. (Genesis, I.2-22) <sup>5</sup>

Ruskin's knowledge of the Bible goes back to his childhood years, when his mother Margaret eagerly infused her religious fervour (she was an Evangelical Christian) into him. There is evidence that the Ruskins devoted every day to the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation and again the Apocalypse and the book of Psalms. At the age of fifteen Ruskin knew the Bible in detail and as John Dixon Hunt has appropriately claimed these daily exercises «determined [his] fine ear for the tonalities and sonorities of the English language and ensured his almost instinctive recall of Biblical sentences which by allusion or direct quotation constitute an ineluctable element of his own thought and expression» <sup>6</sup>. Indeed, the main effect on his works (at least, his early works) is that they reflected a kind of structured paradise which the writer started to question only later in his life.

The above excerpt from Genesis is a good example of Ruskin's debt to the Bible that he often adopted in argument. This approach was motivated by a desire to perceive an almighty presence in the natural world. His tone is frequently placid; he for example speaks of the «spirituality of a waterfall» (III.530), but more often it is ruffled as when he refers to a «storm and merciless sea» (III.533). Very often Ruskin, in his understanding of the aquatic theme, employs allusions to the Bible as a means of combining a rich, aesthetic surface with elaborate symbolism. In his analysis of *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhon [sic] Coming on* (the

<sup>5</sup>) The significance of the first Book of Genesis (particularly Genesis, I.2) for Ruskin is recalled in many *Works*. See for example, IV.218; VI.107; VII.458; XXVI.98; XXXIV.325; XXXVII.137. For Ruskin's debts to the Holy Scriptures see, amongst the others, John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea. A Life of John Ruskin*, London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1982, pp. 13, 28-29. Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years 1819-59*, New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 1985 (repr. 2000), p. 13 ff., and G.P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 243-317.

<sup>6</sup>) Hunt, *The Wider Sea* cit., p. 29.

*Slave Ship*; Fig. 4), he contributes to an understanding of Turner's work in apocalyptic terms<sup>7</sup>. Rage and fury have their place in the painter's world, but we must always be clear about their role and functions:

Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea. (III.572-577)

Here, Ruskin, in making us aware of the spiritual (and, in this case, apocalyptic) dimension of the watery world certainly fulfils its greatest biblical knowledge. His language invokes the sea as an image of death in a manner recalling the book of Revelation, in which the second coming of Christ, similarly to the motions of the "guilty ship", is suggested by an apocalyptic vision.

Ruskin would refer not simply to the Genesis and Revelation, but the allusion to water and to the dead bodies in his analysis of the *Slave Ship*, recalls, for example, Psalm 79.2-3, in which the desolation of Jerusalem is described:

The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them.<sup>8</sup>

Ruskin loved the Psalms. He was not content to deal with physical reality only; he was above all a moral and spiritual teacher who, in order to properly understand and diffuse the Truth and Beauty needed to recognise the deepest aspects of the reality. In particular, this visual allusion to the Psalm 79 suggests a way to reinforce the central meaning of the apocalyptic theme. In essence, we gather that in Ruskin's opinion water figures an example of mercy and of wrath (as well as calmness and turmoil) at the same time. There is a fused point of perception in its characteristic as we will later see. All in all, the idea of Truth is a point where the urge to discover something and establish a new reality is not only strictly theoretical but also morally and religiously true. Initially, Ruskin stated that «the word Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any fact of nature» (III.104). For him, Truth is one of the universal ideas through which the transcendent world can express itself.

<sup>7</sup>) The painting, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840, is now in Boston. A reproduction of the *Slave Ship* appears in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (plate 12) facing page 572 in the Library Edition of *Works*.

<sup>8</sup>) Ruskin will turn to the same Psalm in *Fors Clavigera*. See *Works*, XXIX.288.

Water, then, acquires momentum. It enhances Ruskin's ability to fuse science with spirituality. His work becomes at the same time *Speculum Mundi* and *Speculum Dei* – a mirror representing the natural world as well as God's intervention in it.

Ruskin's religious allusions to water are also shown in a key sentence of *Modern Painters I*: «to paint it [water] is like trying to paint a soul» (III.494). Water for him also becomes a living presence speaking to all those who are able to enter into an intimate relationship with it and understand its language. Man needs to open his soul to the inner reality of nature and to the calm, meditative joy water can offer us. The great painter's task is, for Ruskin, to see «beneath and behind the brown surface» (III.497). This leads to an exemplary teaching both for the public and for the writer himself. He invests water with anthropomorphic qualities, as it is «impatient», «chafing», «substantial», «shattering», «capricious» (III.531). Ruskin, who had coined the term «anthropomorphism» in *Modern Painters III*, refers to the human attributes of water to the point where it suggested to him a natural, spiritual authenticity<sup>9</sup>. He often perceived this «pathetic fallacy» in Turner's *art of water*. Indeed, in his account of *Sun of Venice going to Sea*, Ruskin not only offers an enthusiastic reading of Turner's sea but he also shows how water, for him, will never cease to be a living experience as it is imbued with beautiful, human qualities:

the peculiar power of the picture was the painting of the sea surface, [...]. A stream of splendid colour fell from the boat, but that occupied the centre only [...]. But there the water lay, no dead grey flat paint, but downright clear, playing palpable surface, full of indefinite hue, and retiring as regularly and visibly back and far away, as if there had been objects all over it to tell the story by perspective. (III.545-546)

As he frequently does throughout *Modern Painters*, Ruskin illustrates the different meanings of water by using the masters' depiction of it as an example. If Canaletto's seas are soulless, with the Moderns Ruskin feels that a change was taking place in art and senses a new emotion: the Life in a seascape. This is probably one of the reasons why Turner's water is commented from a multifaceted point of view. Taking precedence over the visual and material aspects of the painter's works, Ruskin's views on the

<sup>9</sup>) Ruskin, in *Modern Painters III*, discusses the logical fallacy of treating inanimate objects or conceptual entities as if they have thoughts or feelings (V.201-220). Yet he asserts elsewhere in the third volume of *Modern Painters* that «the foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterise as the "Pathetic Fallacy"». See *Works*, V.205.



artist's canvases in the fifth section are attentive to the immaterial aspects of the representation. It is the moral, the emotional and the conceptual that one is looking for in his canvases. Ruskin's particular way of seeing Turner's seascapes suggests the painter's understanding of nature. The most important aspects of the artist's Truth, intellect and spirituality are to be understood while observing his pictures.

In *Modern Painters I* Ruskin specifically looks at Turner's *Cowes, Isle of Wight (Fig. 5)* and considers the metaphysical power of water. The picture portrays a summer twilight in a very peaceful atmosphere and Ruskin looks at it as an example of the artistic virtues and Truths existing in Turner's art:

There is not only quietness, there is the very deepest solemnity in the whole of the light [...] and Turner wishes to enhance this feeling by representing not only repose, but *power* in repose [...] if we have but acquaintance with nature enough to understand its language, render this work not only a piece of the most refined truth (as which I have at present named it), but, to my mind, one of the highest pieces of intellectual art existing. (III,547)

Ruskin, like Turner, looks at the effects of nature on the intellect in a way in which man will best apprehend the benevolence of God. There is consistency in his words here, for just as his research into the spiritual was the result of his perception of the natural world, so too was that perception supplemented by his religious background. Thus, it could be argued that Turner's understanding of water and the sea suggests the painter's communion with the natural world, which is far superior to the one discussed by traditional painters. For Ruskin, Turner's supremacy in painting nature is not only due to his ability to understand the landscape and establish a communion with it, but also to the virtue of his craft. Thanks to his skills, he is able to transfer his understanding of the natural world onto canvas. This is the main difference between Turner and his predecessors. The latter are often incapable of letting the spectator perceive the emotions of their landscapes. According to Ruskin, the observer's role becomes very important. He suggests that the spectator becomes involved in the creation of the painting's meaning. They establish a symbiotic relationship between each other, a sort of joint sensitivity. According to Ruskin, Turner's intellect, his craft in painting and his ability to transmit emotions in an art work classify him as *the* superior artist. Ruskin emphasises the importance of water, and more broadly the fact that its pictorial representation was a site of anxiety for both the writers and the painters he was discussing.

However, with time, water for Ruskin would mean eclecticism as well as enthrallment. The significant subject that had simply delighted him in his youth began to obsess him. The difficult questions related to wave-action, the physical and chemical constitution of water, how its motions and

colours work on canvas and its spiritual implications are complemented by a newly elaborated symbolism. Ruskin's «Truth of Water» would combine together with mythology, beauty as well as cloudiness to inspire the reader to a penetrative understanding of each intricate watery vision.

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